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ABSTRACT

The newly developed, 72-item Q-Sort Inventory of Parenting Behaviors was administered to fathers and mothers of 84 young children in a 3-year longitudinal, cross-sectional study of stability and change in parents' child rearing priorities and the impact of the stability and change on child development during the first 5 years of life. Parents of infants showed more changes in their priorities than parents of preschoolers. Differences in parenting of infants and preschoolers were reflected in 15 highly significant infant-preschooler Q-Sort priority differences. Significant correlations were found between the first-year Q-Sort items and the third-year Denver Developmental Screening Test scores for both mothers and fathers. Similar longitudinal correlations were found between the parental Q-Sort items and the McCarthy General Cognitive Index scores. Analyses of parent priorities in this sample revealed elements of stability and expected developmentally appropriate changes in parents' child rearing practices. It is concluded that parenting behaviors affect later cognitive functioning and that the findings support the hypothesis that parenting style changes in response to children's increasing maturity. (Author/RH)

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Parenting Priorities: Stability, Change and Impact on Young Children

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Abstract

The 72-item Q-sort Inventory of Parenting Behaviors was administered to fathers and mothers of young children in a three-year longitudinal / cross-sectional study of the stability and change in parent's childrearing priorities and their impact on child development during the first five years of life.

Parents of infants showed more changes in their priorities than parents of preschoolers. Differences in parenting infants and preschoolers were reflected in the fifteen highly significant infant- preschooler Q-Sort priority differences.

Significant correlations were found between the first-year Q-sort items and the third-year Denver Developmental Screening Test scores for both the mothers and fathers. Similar longitudinal correlations were found between the parental Q-sort items and the McCarthy General Cognitive Index scores with 12 and 6 significant correlations for the mothers and fathers, respectively.

Analyses of the parents' priorities in this sample of 86 sets of parents revealed elements of stability and expected developmentally appropriate changes in parents' child rearing practices.

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Parenting Priorities : Stability, Change and Impact on Young Children

This study was conducted to assess parental behavior, differences in parental behavior associated with parenting infants vs. preschool children, and to monitor changes in parental practices over time. The 72-item Q-sort Inventory of Parenting Behaviors was administered to fathers and mothers of young children in a three-year longitudinal/ cross-sectional study of the stability and change in parent's childrearing priorities and their impact on child development during the first five years of life.

Childrearing attitudes and self-reported behaviors over the three years were monitored by the annual administration of the Q-sort Inventory of Parenting Behaviors to investigate the changes in parents' priorities which were associated with their children's increasing maturity. The McCarthy Scales of Children's Abilities and the Denver Developmental Screening Test were administered to the children to assess the relationship between the parents' priorities and their children's development.

Method

Subjects

Eighty-four families from both rural and urban/suburban residences in Kansas participated. At the start of the data collection 55 children were about 3 months old, while 29 children were approximately 3 years old. Twenty-one of the subjects were from rural backgrounds, while 63 dwelled in urban settings. Forty-four of the subjects were female, and 40 were males. Birth announcements were scanned in the local paper to obtain a sample of infants and preschoolers in the target age group. Twenty-seven of these subjects were reached through the mail, while 57 were given interviews within the home environment. The average age of the wives was 27.2 , (s.d.= 4.47) while the husband's average age was 28.8 (S.D. = 4.9). Mother's mean educational level was 14.9 years (S.D. = 2.28) and the husband's mean years of education was 15.28 (s.d.= 2.9). Twenty-eight mothers and 31 fathers completed the third-year Q-Sort.

Materials

A 72 item Q-sort Inventory of Parenting Behaviors developed by the researchers was the main instrument used in this study.[1] This inventory consisted of a series of 72 parenting behaviors, which represented physical, intellectual, social, and emotional domains of development.

The 72-item instrument was developed by members of the North Central Regional Research Project on Parenting in Urban and Rural Populations (NC-158). Each parent was asked to place one behavioral description in one of 72 boxes arrayed in nine columns on the response sheet. The first column was labeled "Most like how I deal with my child" (1) and the ninth was labeled "Least like how I deal with my child". The data was later recoded so that a 9 represented the highest priority, and 1 indicated the lowest priority. Each column had a limited number of boxes ranging from 5 in the extreme columns to 12 in the central column to force a quasi-normal distribution.

The Denver Developmental Screening Test and the McCarthy Scales of Children's Abilities were administered during the home visits to monitor each child's development. The DDST and McCarthy Scales were administered to the younger and older children, respectively.

Design and Procedure

The infants' parents completed the Q-sort instrument when the infants were 3 months, 12 months, and 24 months old; preschoolers' parents responded at 36 months, 48 months, and 60 months. The children were interviewed three times over the course of the study. After the initial interview at 3 months for the younger group, and 36 months for the older children, a second interview was completed at 12 and 48 months of age, respectively. The third and final interview took place when the younger children were 24 months old, and the older group was 60 months of age.

Results

Differences in parenting infants and preschoolers were reflected in the twenty-five highly significant ($p < .01$) infant-preschooler Q-Sort priority differences. Table 1 lists the items that showed significant differences.

Insert Table 1 About Here

[1]The Q-Sort packet is available for $15.00 from:
Robert Boger, Ph.D.
Institute for Family and Child Study,
College of Human Ecology,
East Lansing, Michigan 48824

Stability was found for only 17% of the infants' mothers items and 8% of their infants' fathers' items ($p < .01$). Preschoolers' parents showed greater stability with their mothers and fathers showing significant two-year correlations for 39% and 38% of the items, respectively ($p < .01$). Conversely, parents of infants showed more changes in their priorities than parents of preschoolers. Significant ($p < .01$) changes from 3 months to 24 months were found for 21 mother items in contrast to only six significant differences for mothers of children from 36 to 60 months. Parents of infants showed more changes than did parents of preschoolers. As these children matured, parents would encourage them to feed themselves, and involved them in more group activities. They also increased each child's level of responsibility, expecting them to play a greater role in areas such as personal hygiene, and obeying household rules, as indicated in Table 2a.

Insert Table 2a about here

Parents of preschoolers also changed their parenting behaviors over the three years, but not to the same extent as the parents of infants. Parents of preschoolers encouraged their children to assert themselves, and tried to give them some privacy. Table 2b shows these significant changes.

Insert Table 2b about here

Early parental behavior and the children's subsequent development were examined to determine their association. Significant ($p < 0.05$) correlations were found between the first-year Q-sort items and the third-year DDST scores for both the infants' mothers and the infants' fathers, as shown in Tables 3a and 3b. There were significant correlations for 26 of the 72 the mothers' and 23 of the 72 for the fathers' items.

Insert Table 3a and 3b about here

Similar longitudinal correlations were found between the parental Q-sort items and the McCarthy General Cognitive Index scores for the older children with 6 and 4 significant correlations for the preschoolers' mothers and the preschoolers' fathers, respectively, on Table 4.

Table 4 also shows that children of mothers and fathers who stress physical activity, tend to score lower on the MGCI than do children whose parents do not stress physical activity. Children, whose mothers encouraged them to use their hands skillfully (a cognitive-sensorimotor task), and/or discuss their misdeeds, tended to score higher on the MGCI than did children whose mothers did not follow these practices.

Insert Table 4 about here

Conclusions

This study presents evidence to support the hypothesis that parenting style changes in response to children's increasing maturity. Parents of infants changed their childrearing attitudes more than did parents of preschoolers, indicating that caregivers tend to adapt to their infants' developmental autonomy by increasing both their responsibilities and privileges.

Differences in parenting infants and preschoolers were reflected in the fifteen highly significant infant preschooler Q-sort inventory items. Significant correlations were also found between the first-year Q-sort inventory items and the third-year Denver Developmental Screening Test scores for both mothers and fathers. Similar longitudinal correlations were found between the parental Q-sort items and the McCarthy General Cognitive Index scores.

Mothers who encouraged cognitive activity had children who scored higer on the MGCI, while parents who emphasised physical activity had children who scored lower on this cognitive test. This study presents evidence that parenting behaviors affect later cognitive functioning, as well as showing that parents made developmentally appropriate changes in their parenting priorities.

Table 1
Q-SORT INVENTORY ITEMS THAT SHOWED SIGNIFICANT INFANT / PRESCHOOLER DIFFERENCES*

	INFANT (N=55)	PRESCHOOL (N=29)
PHYSICAL DOMAIN ITEMS:		
I encourage my child to use his or her hands skillfully.	7.62	5.83
I encourage my child to try new physical activities.	6.40	5.00
I involve my child in group physical or sport activities.	3.60	2.41
I encourage my child's eye-hand coordination.	7.56	4.97
I take my child for regular medical and dental checkups.	8.04	5.59
I teach my child to roll, kick, throw and catch.	5.42	3.79
I provide my child with opportunities for physical exercise	6.05	4.69
INTELLECTUAL DOMAIN ITEMS:		
I encourage my child to ask questions.	4.44	5.45
I help my child do most things.	5.93	4.72
I take my child on trips out of the house whenever possible.	6.42	5.28
I often sit and read to my child or have my child read to me.	5.78	6.79
I listen when my child tells me stories.	4.67	6.59
SOCIAL DOMAIN ITEMS:		
I encourage my child to play with toys.	4.75	6.59
I encourage my child not to be shy.	4.64	3.59
I teach my child to be polite.	5.04	6.21
I teach my child to obey rules I have set.	5.00	6.24
EMOTIONAL DOMAIN ITEMS:		
I spank my child when necessary.	3.25	5.69
I punish my child for misbehaving.	3.40	5.56
I make sure my child has some privacy.	4.80	3.66
I encourage pretend play for expression of feelings.	4.11	5.48
I talk to my child about his or her misbehavior.	4.93	7.07
I often praise my child.	7.15	8.03
I send my child away from me for misbehaving.	2.16	3.97
My spouse and I often play with our child so that we can enjoy being together.	7.49	5.10
I comfort my child when he or she cries at night.	7.96	6.31

* $p < .01$

Table 2a
PRIORITY CHANGES FOR PARENTS OF INFANTS*
(N=33)

	MEANS		
	YR 1 (3Mo)	YR 3 (24Mo)	D.O.C.**
PHYSICAL DOMAIN ITEMS:			
I encourage my child to use his or her hands skillfully.	7.67	5.21	-
I encourage my child to try new physical activities.	6.45	4.67	-
I provide opportunities for my child to nap, rest, or relax.	8.00	6.48	-
I encourage my child to feed himself or herself.	4.48	6.03	+
I involve my child in group physical or sport activities.	3.76	2.94	-
I encourage my child's eye-hand coordination.	7.52	5.82	-
I take my child for regular medical / dental check-ups.	7.94	6.94	-
I encourage my child to clean his or her mouth or teeth each day.	4.00	6.21	+
INTELLECTUAL DOMAIN ITEMS:			
I provide educational toys or games for my child.	6.76	5.45	-
I show my child how to use things or how things work.	4.97	6.00	+
I teach my child how to help me.	4.21	5.64	+
I often sit and read to my child or have my child read to me.	5.67	7.00	+
I listen when my child tells me stories.	4.64	5.91	+
SOCIAL DOMAIN ITEMS:			
I encourage my child to be involved in competitive activities.	2.79	1.79	-
I teach my child to obey rules I have set.	5.00	5.91	+
I encourage my child to take turns.	4.55	5.73	+
EMOTIONAL DOMAIN ITEMS:			
I spank my child when necessary.	3.09	4.79	+
I punish my child for misbehaving.	2.94	4.48	+
I make sure my child has some privacy.	5.03	3.21	-
I often praise my child.	7.06	7.97	+
I comfort my child when he or she cries out at night.	8.18	7.12	-

* $p < .01$

** Direction of Change

Table 2b
PRIORITY CHANGES FOR PARENTS OF PRESCHOOLERS*
(N=23)

	MEANS		
	YR 1 (3Mo)	YR 3 (24Mo)	D.O.C.**
PHYSICAL DOMAIN ITEMS:			
I provide opportunities for my child to nap, rest, or relax.	7.04	5.09	-
I encourage my child to feed himself or herself.	5.74	4.00	-
I encourage my child to move and explore freely.	5.39	4.17	-
INTELLECTUAL DOMAIN ITEM:			
I pronounce words correctly when I talk to my child.	6.91	6.09	-
SOCIAL DOMAIN ITEM:			
I encourage my child to be assertive or stand up for himself or herself.	3.09	3.87	+
EMOTIONAL DOMAIN ITEM:			
I make sure my child has some privacy.	3.48	5.13	+

* $p < .01$

** Direction of Change

Table 3a
INFANTS' 3 MONTH MOTHERS' ITEMS SIGNIFICANTLY CORRELATED WITH DENVER DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING TEST SCORES AT 24 MONTHS*
(N=39)

	PEARSON r
PHYSICAL DOMAIN ITEMS:	
I encourage my child to use his or her hands skillfully.	-.46**
I involve my child in group physical or sport activities.	-.44**
I encourage my child's eye-hand coordination.	-.67***
I take my child for regular medical and dental check-ups.	-.59***
I encourage my child to move and explore freely.	-.35*
I teach my child to roll, kick, throw, or catch.	-.54***
I encourage my child to be involved in motor activities in spite of minor bumps and bruises.	-.40*
I provide my child with opportunities for physical exercise.	-.64***
INTELLECTUAL DOMAIN ITEMS:	
I encourage my child to ask questions.	.46**
I take my child on trips out of the house whenever possible.	-.46**
I talk to my child about how things look or how things happen.	-.34*
I often sit and read to my child or have my child read to me.	.47**
I listen when my child tells me stories.	.59***
SOCIAL DOMAIN ITEMS:	
I encourage my child to share toys.	.52**
I my child to play with both boys and girls.	.34*
I encourage my child not to be shy.	-.38*
I teach my child to be polite.	.39*
I encourage my child to play with children from different backgrounds.	-.33*
EMOTIONAL DOMAIN ITEMS:	
I spank my child when necessary.	.52**
I punish my child for misbehaving.	.55***
I make sure my child has some privacy.	.34*
I encourage pretend play for expression of feelings.	.33*
I talk to my child about his or her misbehavior.	.67***
I send my child away from me for misbehaving.	.43**
My spouse and I often play with our child so that we can enjoy being together.	-.52**
I comfort my child when he or she cries at night.	-.48**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 3b
INFANTS' FATHERS' ITEMS SIGNIFICANTLY CORRELATED WITH DENVER DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING TEST AT 24 MONTHS*
(N=39)

	PEARSON r
PHYSICAL DOMAIN ITEMS:	
I provide my child with the opportunity to play outdoors.	.54***
I make sure my child eats nutritionally balanced meals.	-.40*
I make sure my child has good health habits.	-.33*
I encourage my child's eye-hand coordination.	-.48**
I take my child for regular medical and dental check-ups.	-.60***
I encourage my child to move and explore freely.	-.39*
I help or encourage my child to take a bath.	-.42**
I teach my child to roll, kick, throw, or catch.	-.38*
I provide my child with opportunities for physical exercise.	-.55***
INTELLECTUAL DOMAIN ITEMS:	
I show my child how to solve a problem step by step.	.37*
I talk with my child about what happened during the day.	.43**
I often sit and read to my child or have my child read to me.	.32*
SOCIAL DOMAIN ITEMS:	
I encourage my child to share with others.	.62***
I teach my child to be responsible.	.32*
I encourage my child to play mostly with the same age playmates.	-.36*
I teach my child to be polite.	.41**
I encourage my child to play with children from different backgrounds.	-.44**
EMOTIONAL DOMAIN ITEMS:	
I spank my child when necessary.	.43**
I punish my child for misbehaving.	.54***
I talk to my child about his or her misbehavior.	.60***
I threaten to leave my child if he or she disobeys me.	.32*
My spouse and I often play with our child so that we can enjoy being together.	-.65***
I comfort my child when he or she cries at night.	-.42**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$)

Table 4

PRESCHOOLERS' PARENTS' ITEMS SIGNIFICANTLY CORRELATED WITH THE McCARTHY SCALES OF CHILDREN'S ABILITY 60 MONTHS*
(p < .05)
(N=20)

Mother's Items:	PEARSON r
PHYSICAL DOMAIN ITEMS:	
I encourage my child to use his or her hands skillfully.	.60**
I involve my child in group physical or sport activities.	-.46*
SOCIAL DOMAIN ITEMS:	
I encourage my child to get involved in group play.	-.50*
I encourage my child to be involved in competitive activities.	-.64**
I encourage my child to play with both boys and girls.	-.47*
EMOTIONAL DOMAIN ITEM:	
I talk to my child about his or her misbehavior.	.47*
Father's Items:	
PHYSICAL DOMAIN ITEMS:	
I get involved with my child in physically active play.	-.49*
I encourage my child to clean his or her mouth each day.	-.50*
I teach my child to roll, kick, throw, or catch.	-.48*
SOCIAL DOMAIN ITEM:	
I encourage my child to be involved in competitive activities.	-.48*

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001